

NEW BEARINGS IN THE 'CATHOLIC' NOVEL¹

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THIS is an important book. For beginning with this ejaculation from the litany of 'blurb' writers I have a reason; it is to underline at the outset the fact that whatever disagreements one may have with Mr O'Donnell, his book marks the first serious and detailed attempt to consider the issues raised by the remarkable group of contemporary novels which have been written by Catholics. One avoids, carefully, labelling the group, although it is clear they possess a certain unity. *Maria Cross* (the title is named after a Mauriac character) in offering the first account of this aspect of contemporary fiction raises the fundamental questions: what is the relationship between 'belief' and fiction; in what way does 'belief' modify and colour the sensibility of an individual writer; is it possible for the Catholic novelist to take over Maritain's dictum, namely to have compassionate understanding of the sinner without collusion with the sin? The general impression that Mr O'Donnell's book leaves is that he sides with Newman rather than Maritain, for whom literature was 'the Life and Remains of *Natural Man*, innocent or guilty'. I say 'general impression' advisedly because Mr O'Donnell works for the major part of his book in terms of particular novels and novelists, and consequently such generalized dicta never become explicit. There is no affinity in approach between *Maria Cross* and *Art and Scholasticism*.

'This is not a book about Catholicism', Mr O'Donnell begins his Preface, 'It is a book about eight writers who are Catholics. It is not about their lives, or the techniques of these writers, but about the imaginative worlds which their works reveal.' Mr O'Donnell's argument as it develops is much too elaborate to be summarized here, but one might begin by noticing the curious distinction he makes in his opening sentence, and which pervades the whole book, the distinction between 'technique' and 'imaginative world'. For the literary critic, the two must be co-extensive, the 'imaginative world' only existing in so far as the 'technique' has put it there; neither can be considered apart from the other,

1 *Maria Cross*. By Donat O'Donnell (Chatto and Windus, 21s.).

except as profitless abstractions. The distinction which Mr O'Donnell makes, and upon which he is anxious to insist, contributes towards making him curiously indifferent to the language which the writer uses. Sometimes, indeed, he seems to treat the language as a kind of appendage to 'the world'. For instance, in a generally adverse account of Evelyn Waugh he remarks, 'just as snobbery and adolescent cruelty gave edge or tension to his early work, so now the intense romantic and exclusive piety of his mature years gave him strength and eloquence'. The 'eloquence' comes almost parenthetically into account, as something existing *apart from* the 'imaginative pattern' that Mr O'Donnell is intent on tracing. What is apparent in *Brideshead Revisited* is a heightened consciousness of 'style', invariably attendant on the 'romantic' side of Waugh, and entirely absent from the taut, satirical prose of *A Handful of Dust* and *The Loved One*. Mr O'Donnell's 'pattern' would seem to suggest a similar design, though it does so by ignoring the basic strands—the strands of the language used.

Given this kind of deflection it is remarkable how Mr O'Donnell maintains his critical balance. That he does so, and does so triumphantly, one has only to turn to his chapters on Waugh and Greene to discover, which, considered as a whole, constitute the most perceptive criticism that I know of these two writers. Isolating with delicacy and precision Waugh's 'two most obvious characteristics—his humour and his snobbery', Mr O'Donnell goes on to show how they have given these novels their particular shape and force, how if Waugh were not 'the man who refers frequently to the "lower orders"', he would not have written such funny books'. Of his analysis of Greene's *The Heart of the Matter* I can only say that I find it, apart from certain points of emphasis, extremely convincing. To anyone concerned with analysing and evaluating that novel, the central difficulty is with Scobie in that 'one can never be sure whether the narration represents what he feels, or what he admits to himself that he feels'. It is a vital distinction, and on the answer given to it depends to what extent the reader is to judge Scobie's actions as critically 'placed' by Greene. By careful analysis Mr O'Donnell exposes the central ambiguity that the novel reveals, an ambiguity in the *facts* of the novel so that 'the reader who feels that a theological-emotional sleight of hand has been practised on him can hardly be blamed if henceforth he looks for the missing card elsewhere than in the

pack dealt by, or for, Scobie'. The last section of this chapter in which Mr O'Donnell looks at the novel for its social significance is much less satisfactory, and the rather strained enquiry prefigures the discussion in the final chapter in which Mr O'Donnell seeks to draw the strands of his book together to reveal their final pattern.

It is this rather over-riding sense of 'pattern' that robs the final chapter of its compulsion; there is a determination to make things 'fit',² and one is continually made to feel that, acute as many of Mr O'Donnell's conclusions are, they could be legitimately extended, and often with much great appropriateness, to writers who fall outside the Catholic group he is considering. Auden, for instance, offers affinities with Greene³ considerably more illuminating than anything Greene may have in common with Claudel, Bernanos, or Seán O'Faoláin, to mention three of the writers studied by Mr O'Donnell.

Of the remaining chapters, those on Mauriac and Péguy are the most satisfactory. The chapter on Mauriac is especially valuable with its insistence on the significance of the chronology of Mauriac's novels, a significance which has been difficult to appreciate by those whose approach has been made by way of the translations of Mr Gerard Hopkins, where no attention has been paid to chronological development. Perhaps Mr O'Donnell lays too much stress on this—it would seem so when he dismisses *La Pharisienne*, probably the most remarkable novel to appear in England during the last decade, as 'a laborious and dreary failure'.

It would be carping, however, to conclude a review of *Maria Cross* on a note of disagreement, because obviously it is a book of prime importance for anyone whose concern is with the kind of novel so misleadingly called 'Catholic'. It is a book which, in its realization that in the literary order, dogma must never be applied dogmatically, is able to attend intelligently and sensitively to *what is being said* by the Catholic novelist, without any irritable reaching for either the thurible or the moral smelling salts.

2 Even to the extent of finding Mr Greene 'coming nearest to the fascist mentality in his idealization of policemen and particularly in the ambiguity with which, in *The Heart of the Matter*, he treats the connivance of his sanctified policeman in murder'. It is in important significance of this kind that Mr O'Donnell is, presumably, most obedient to Chesterton's function of criticism, quoted approvingly in the Preface, 'to say things about an author . . . that would have made him jump out of his boots'.

3 A suitable text to consider as a starting point would be *The Old School*, an anthology of mordant recollections about life in English public schools, edited by Greene and contributed to by Auden. It would be a text tellingly illustrative of Mr O'Donnell's themes of exile and childhood.